

Life at Fort Ray

Soldiers arriving at Sitka in June 1941 found Sitka to have adequate accommodations, late model cars, and other amenities. The population of Sitka swelled from several hundred to several thousand.



Sitka Historical Society
Isabel Miller Museum photograph

Fort Ray was named in honor of Brig. Gen. Patrick H. Ray, who was stationed at Sitka in 1897.

When in Sitka, some men saw movies, went to bars, restaurants, church, or the U.S.O. Others headed straight to the Swan Lake Inn, heart of the red-light district.

Fishing was the number one recreational pastime. Hiking, exploring, and gold panning tied for second. Saturday night boxing was instituted in an effort to improve morale and stop bar fights between army and navy enlisted men. Everyone in Sitka was invited to attend the fights. Parties and dances were held with hopes of regulating interactions between military men and civilian women.



USPX Crew - Fort Ray
Sitka Historical Society/Isabel
Museum Miller photograph



View of KRAY's stage, Sitka, AK, 8-16-42
Sitka Historical Society/Isabel Miller Museum photograph

On October 5, 1941, six GIs started an army radio station because they were tired of their limited supply of worn out records. This radio station, KRAY, may have been the first armed services radio station.

Fort Ray - the Army garrison built to protect Sitka's Naval Facilities

Build-up

In 1937 the Navy built the first seaplane base in the Territory of Alaska on Japonski Island. This base was used to support surveillance floatplanes patrolling the entire coast of Southeast Alaska and the Gulf of Alaska.

One of the Army's top missions was the defense of naval facilities. In 1940 the construction of an army garrison and fixed coastal defense at Sitka was approved. Fort Ray was the earliest authorized army facility of the World War II era in the Territory.



Sitka Historical Society/Isabel Miller Museum photograph

ALICE

CHARCOAL

Construction of the airport runway is underway in this 1965 photo of Japonski Island. Charcoal and Alice islands are slightly right off center.
National Archives Photo

STIKA AIRPORT

This brochure was produced by the Department of Natural Resources for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities as partial mitigation for impacts caused by the Sitka Airport Property Acquisition and Obstruction Removal Project.

To learn more about Fort Ray and WWII in Alaska, read: *"Alaska, our last frontier in time of peace, our first front in war." : An Interpretation and Description of Fort Ray Alaska*, prepared by Dr. Michael Dunning, Ph.D. - Historian and Amanda A. Welsh, AIA - Architect, and *Narrative Report on Alaska Construction, 1941-1944*, by James D. Bush.

The World War II era military remains in the Sitka area are some of the most accessible remains of this type.

Fort Ray Basics

Because of the limited useable land available, Charcoal and Alice islands, just south of Japonski Island, were chosen for the Army garrison. Officially named Fort Ray in September 1941, the Charcoal and Alice island facilities served as the Army headquarters from 1941-1943. The lack of space meant that the Naval base and Army garrison shared many facilities on Japonski Island but the Army's administration, housing, and hospital facilities were on Alice and Charcoal islands. A 1.8 mile long causeway linked the outer army cantonments, ammunition bunkers, and defensive gun batteries on Virublennoi, Gold, Sasedni, Kirushkin, and Makhnati islands to Japonski, Charcoal, and Alice islands.

Construction Challenges

Southeast Alaska is a land of steep mountains, island chains, and waterways. Sitka is built along the steep western shoreline of Baranof Island surrounded by many small islands and protected waterways. In July 1941 the arduous task of leveling Charcoal and Alice islands and building linking causeways began; half a million tons of rock was dynamited and moved. It took almost one year to change Charcoal Island from its original height to a level eight feet above high tide.

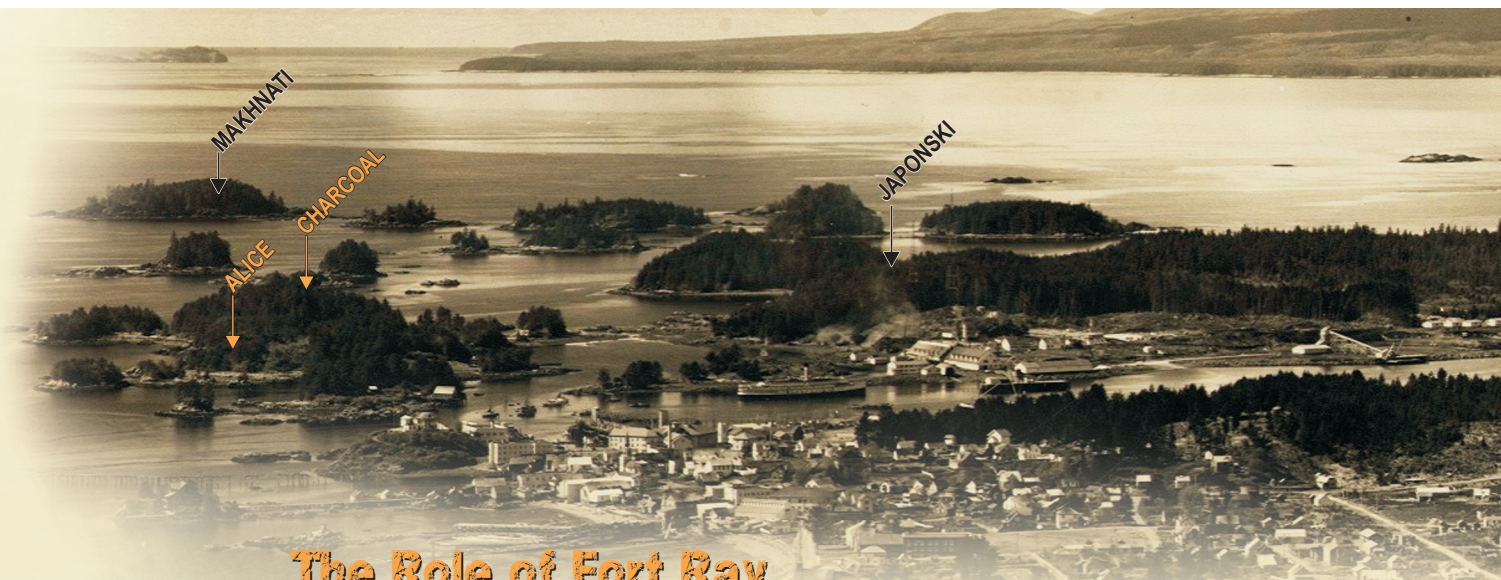
The Role of Fort Ray

When completed, the Army garrison protecting Sitka's Naval Operating Base could house 250 officers and 3050 enlisted men. Greater Fort Ray had 136 semi-permanent and temporary buildings including eleven administrative buildings, eighteen messhalls, a 150 bed hospital, twelve recreation buildings, Quartermaster (QM) and Ordnance warehouses, Ordnance shops, cold storage buildings, fire stations, bakery, laundry and dry cleaning plant, steam plant, repair shops, replacement shop, QM gasoline storage, ammunition magazines for ground troops, radio station, guard house, infirmaries, post exchanges, libraries, theater, and post office.

The two-year build-up of Fort Ray was all the Army had time for in Sitka.

While defenses were being built in Sitka, military installations were also being constructed at Kodiak and Dutch Harbor. Despite these preparations, the U.S. and its Alaska territory were unprepared for enemy invasion of the Aleutian Islands. In 1942 the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor and invaded Attu and Kiska islands attempting to divert the U.S. away from a planned attack at Midway. The Japanese were unsuccessful and when they lost at Midway, they also lost their Pacific naval superiority. Broad surveillance of the Pacific was no longer needed and the Sitka Naval Operating Base became only a refueling point between Kodiak and Puget Sound. When most of the Fort Ray troops were shipped to the Aleutians, the Army decided on a major reorganization and eventual closure of its Sitka facilities.

In spring 1944 the Army closed its Sitka base. On August 15 that same year the Naval Operating Base was decommissioned. In 1946 Japonski Island and Fort Ray were transferred to the Alaska Native Service. The Alice Island hospital was used as a Native sanatorium, treating many victims of tuberculosis.



1940 - before construction of Fort Ray



The original buildings on Charcoal and Alice islands included administration, housing, and hospital facilities.

Background, National Archives photograph
Upper right, Sitka Historical Society/Isabel
Miller Museum photograph